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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KS](#) [JA](#)  
SUBJECT: ROK-JAPAN TIES STUCK BETWEEN STAGNATION AND  
SUSPICION

Classified By: A/POL Brian McFeeters. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During a February 9 luncheon with poloffs, Japanese Embassy Political Counselor Yamamoto Yasushi characterized ROK-Japanese relations as stagnant and opined that significant improvement in bilateral relations was unlikely until after the Roh Moo-hyun administration left office because nothing would satisfy President Roh. In a separate conversation with a visiting EAP/K official, MOFAT Northeast Asia Division I (Japan) Director Lee Hee-sup agreed that ROK-Japanese ties were unlikely to warm this year, but he ascribed it to a concern that Japanese officials might take unhelpful steps ahead of Japanese local and parliamentary elections in April and July. END SUMMARY.

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JAPAN: WAITING OUT ROH  
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¶2. (C) Poloff met on February 9 with Japanese Embassy Political Counselor Yamamoto Yasuski and First Secretary Sunami Akihiko for an update on ROK-Japanese relations. Yamamoto said that the present status was stagnation that probably would not improve until after the Roh Moo-hyun administration left following the December 2007 general election. One could say that ties on the surface were improving, but three Abe-Roh meetings really had not changed much (Prime Minister Abe visited Seoul on October 9, the day of the DPRK nuclear test, and Roh and Abe had discussions in November at APEC in Vietnam and in January at the ASEAN Plus Three meetings in the Philippines). South Korea and Japan planned to hold three events in March (EEZ talks, Vice Minister Talks, and a Japanese Foreign Ministerial visit to Seoul) that under other circumstances might be an opportunity for progress, but Yamamoto indicated that Tokyo was basically waiting for Roh's successor. Initial plans for a possible Roh visit to Japan in the first half of 2007 had been dropped. Discussions on a possible ROK-Japanese FTA were likewise on hold.

¶3. (C) Yamamoto lamented that concerning the Liancourt Rocks, Yasukuni Shrine visits, and textbooks, the ROKG could be expected to shift the goal posts regardless of Japanese efforts to soothe ROK concerns. For example, even if Prime Minister Abe did not visit Yasukuni while Prime Minister, the ROKG would still be upset over the shrine's existence. At one point the ROKG protested Japanese history textbooks that were insensitive about Japanese colonialism, but now the ROKG

was upset about social studies textbooks that claimed the Liancourt Rocks were Japanese. In contrast, he said, Chinese officials seemed to be more interested in developing a future-oriented relationship with Japan and less demanding than ROKG officials on the history issue.

14. (C) First Secretary Sunami took a longer term perceptive noting that Japan and South Korea shared similar values, such as democracy, human rights, market economics, and wanted close alliances with the United States, so there were reasons for both capitals to want an improved relationship. Still, this was not something that would take care of itself because history could not be forgotten. He opined that success in the Six Party Talks could only serve to help improve ROK-Japanese relations, but even this would not be a cure-all.

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ROKG: CONCERNED ABOUT JAPANESE INTENTIONS  
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15. (C) In a separate conversation on February 9, Lee Hee-sup, Director of the Northeast Asia Division I (Japan) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, told poloff that the current stumbling blocks were upcoming elections in Japan that might lead politicians to bash Korea to appeal to conservative voters. Lee said that after Prime Minister Abe's inauguration, the fact that he had not visited the Yasukuni Shrine and that he had met with President Roh in Seoul, Vietnam, and the Philippines, were good signs. ROK Foreign Minister Song Min-soon in December visited Japan and stressed that the ROK needed to do better understand the importance of the Japanese abduction issue and the Japanese government should better appreciate the special inter-Korean situation. The ROKG, Lee said, wanted to keep this momentum going.

16. (C) The concern for Seoul was what would be next, Lee continued. On February 22, the Shimane prefecture was expected to celebrate "Takeshima Day" in line with an ordinance passed in 2005 to commemorate a 1905 notice that had declared the Liancourt Rocks as part of the Japanese prefecture. This ordinance, Lee said, re-stoked the Liancourt Rocks issue. Perhaps the Japanese would want to send another survey this spring before the June meeting of the International Hydrographic Organization. In March, the ROKG also expected the Japanese government to announce its review of Japanese textbooks, which might raise concerns in the ROK. Finally, ahead of local Japanese election in April and the July upper house of parliament vote, the ROKG was worried that politicians would cater to conservative elements and do or say something unhelpful on the Liancourt Rocks or Yasukuni Shrine. Especially now that Abe's popular approval seemed to be falling, Abe's supporters might be more eager for victories, perhaps at South Korea's expense, Lee said. Finally, some in the ROKG were worried that Abe himself might visit the Yasukuni Shrine, perhaps this fall, which would require a ROKG response.

17. (C) Despite poloff attempts to change the subject and to emphasize the interests that Tokyo and Seoul shared, Lee continued to cite reasons to distrust the Japanese government. Lee said that Abe's leadership represented a rise of the post-World War Two generation and that Japanese politicians were less and less willing to apologize about history. The ROK people, however, still needed reminders that the Japanese had learned from the past. Japan was changing its laws, such as elevating its Defense Agency to a ministry, and Prime Minister Abe was talking about revising the Japanese constitution. Lee concluded by saying that the U.S.-Japanese alliance was one of the few remaining limits on Japan, and Seoul would grow more concerned if it seemed that Tokyo was seeking to distance itself from Washington. Poloff sought to reassure Lee that on this matter, at least, he should not be concerned because the U.S.-Japanese relationship was strong.

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